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Inside, Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.) was standing near the door of a second-floor conference room filled with lobbyists and defense contractors. While some sipped cocktails and looked on, the lawmaker threw his arms around others’ shoulders to pose for photographs.

The fundraiser raised the ire of anti-earmark activists because it came roughly three weeks before lawmakers are due to hand in their appropriations requests. The groups argue Murtha effectively is selling taxpayer-funded projects for campaign cash — a charge bolstered by the fact that every private entity that received a Murtha earmark last year had contributed to his coffers at some point since 2005. (For Murtha’s part, his office has defended the event as timed to coincide with the anniversary of the 1974 special election that first sent him to Congress).

But the Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense chairman is hardly the only panel member staging fundraising events in the runup to the deadline for earmark submissions.

Despite a growing din of criticism of the phenomenon by outside groups — and intensified media scrutiny enabled by new transparency standards — at least 19 appropriators held events last week or have them planned in the two weeks ahead, according to copies of invitations to the events and the fundraising schedules maintained by both House party committees. That list includes events for 14 Democrats and five Republicans, slightly more than a quarter of the committee’s total membership.

In interviews, appropriators holding the events defended them as completely unrelated to the

looming request deadline — often pointing instead to another important date slightly beyond it on the calendar. The first fundraising quarter of the year ends March 31, and lawmakers said they simply want to show a strong war chest.

“I don’t even know when the deadline is,” said Rep. Todd Tiahrt (R-Kan.), an appropriator who has a fundraiser at the Capitol Hill Club set for the day before the March 19 earmark request deadline. “I’m more interested in showing I have a positive balance” on the quarterly campaign finance report.

Likewise, Rep. Mike Simpson (R-Idaho), an appropriator who has held several fundraisers in the weeks leading up to the filing deadline, said the earmark deadline didn’t have anything to do with the timing. “I think a lot of people are trying to scare people off by having money in the bank,” he said.

But earmark critics have zeroed in on the links between campaign contributions and earmarks.

Rep. Jeb Hensarling (Texas), chairman of the conservative Republican Study Committee, ripped Murtha’s “earmark factory” and the ties between earmarks and campaign contributors.

“What the American people see all too often is campaign cash in one end and special interest earmarks coming out the other,” Hensarling said.

Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) said the ties between campaign cash and earmarks go far beyond Murtha and far beyond any one party.

“Earmarking is very much a part of the fundraising culture for Democrats and Republicans, and that’s why it’s so hard to get rid of,” Flake said. Flake said Republican attacks on Murtha’s earmarking practices would stick better if the GOP didn’t have Members doing the same thing.

“It undercuts it horribly. We are just as guilty. ... We made an art form out of this fundraising-for-earmarks.”

Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.), another earmark critic, is among a small number of lawmakers who have signed a Citizens Against Government Waste earmark pledge to back legislation that would “end the linkage between campaign contributions and earmarks.” (A CAGW member dressed in a pig suit was turned away from the Murtha fundraiser last week; the group has named Murtha “Porker of the Year.”)

Campbell said writing legislation banning earmarks to campaign contributors is tricky, but important.

Campbell said the rule should be, “Don’t submit an earmark where you’ve received a campaign contribution. ... This cash-for-cash stuff I think is unseemly.”

A Roll Call review of the spending panel’s Defense Subcommittee last year showed a strong correlation between contributions and earmarks. All but two of the 15 panel members received campaign contributions from at least half of the private entities that received earmarks. In many cases, the links were stronger: In addition to Murtha, Rep. Norm Dicks (D-Wash.) got political money from every entity for which he sponsored a project. Rep. Peter Visclosky (D-Ind.) got contributions from 17 of 21 of his earmark beneficiaries; Rep. Jim Moran (D-Va.) was helped by 23 of 26 companies he favored.

Among Republicans, subcommittee ranking member Bill Young (Fla.) received campaign

contributions from 28 of the 30 private entities that got earmarks from him, and Rep. David Hobson (Ohio) got help from 11 of 14 of those companies.

“They’ve got their lists and they’re checking it twice,” said Steve Ellis, vice president of Taxpayers for Common Sense. Of the proximity of the fundraisers to the request deadline, he said: “Nobody can say definitively that that’s what makes somebody write a check or have an event. But the flip side is nobody can say definitely that that’s not why they’re having this event.”

House Oversight and Government Reform Chairman Henry Waxman (Calif.), the one Democrat who has pledged not to request earmarks this year and urged a moratorium, said it’s the “sorry fact of the matter” that Members feel pressure to raise money, and people who have been helped by the Member or would like to be helped by the Member on any number of issues give contributions.

“That’s why I would like to see public funding of campaigns,” he said.

Advocates for public financing said the spectacle from the Appropriations Committee makes the argument for reform. Craig Holman, a lobbyist for Public Citizen, pointed to the states, where 24 legislatures have enacted some type of restrictions on fundraising, many of them targeted at lobbyists.

“They haven’t fared very well in court unless they’ve been defended on the grounds that the temporal proximity between a contribution and a legislator acting on the contributor’s legislative agenda gives rise to a heightened perception of corruption,” Holman said.

Tiahrt denied any connection between his fundraisers and earmarks.

"I don't think there really is any connection," he said. Tiahrt said the kinds of projects he supports are projects that help bring drinking water to impoverished counties, or for poor schools. "In some parts of my district, people are still hauling their own drinking water," he said. "I will use the earmarking process if I can to make sure they have potable water, and I don't get any PAC contributions for that."

Other GOPers said lawmakers need to change either the process or their behavior.

Republican Conference Chairman Adam Putnam (Fla.) has been a harsh critic of Murtha but said he wouldn't tar Members just because they hold a fundraiser near the deadline. Putnam said reforming earmarks so they don't go to private entities would solve the problem. "If you're not getting earmarks for private entities, then those issues go away," he said.

One appropriator, Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), is holding a campaign event shortly before the deadline, but there is no chance he'll be collecting cash for earmarks. "I am backing a moratorium and I won't be requesting any earmarks," Kirk said. "I just hope others follow suit."

Rep. Zach Wamp (R-Tenn.), an appropriator, added that panel members fundraising off the process do so at their own peril. "They may be at risk. A lot of them are still doing business the old way, and things are changing."

Correction: March 4, 2008

"The article incorrectly reported that Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.) arrived at his fundraising event in a dark sedan and was shouted at by anti-earmark activists. The lawmaker arrived at the event in a silver Buick and entered the building before the protesters had set up outside.